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ABSTRACT

English language education in Colombia has been improved because the teachers have organized professional associations and have received assistance and support from the Colombian and United States governments to improve teaching methods, teacher preparation, and teaching materials. With the help of the University of California at Los Angeles, the Colombian American Linguistic Institute was founded to train Colombian English teachers in the fields of linguistics, phonology, morphology, syntax, contrastive analysis, audiolingual methodology, and audiovisual aids. Through such teacher education, the grammar translation method and the direct method of language teaching have been abandoned for an audiolingual or structural approach. (VM)

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ENGLISH IN COLOMBIA

by

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There are three groups of people who study English in Colombia. One group studies compulsory English because it is a subject included in high school or secondary school program of the Ministry of Education. English is taught from first to fourth year of high school, three hours every week and from fifth to sixth year of high school, two hours every week. Considering that each academic year has 30 weeks, we can say that Colombian high school students are taught English about 90 hours every year for four years and 60 hours every year for two years, which gives a total amount of 480 hours of English taught as a Second Language in any Colombian high school.

The second group involves University students who can choose to study English or any other foreign language. Most of them prefer to study English because their reference materials are written in English and the possibilities of their getting a post graduate scholarship in the States depends on their proficiency in English.

The third group is that in which people are interested in learing English because they plan to travel, need English to communicate with foreign visitors and friends, hope to get a scholarship abroad, seek better positions and salary in their jobs, hope to teach English or

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would like to study a foreign language. About 40,000 students in Colombia go to private institutions, some of them established with exclusively cultural and nonprofit goals, such as the Binational Centers sponsored by the USIS, United States Information Service, in many countries around the world.

What was the State of Teaching and Learning English in Colombia about fifteen years ago?

There were two approaches: 1. The Traditional Grammar Translation method used in high schools in which the teacher used textbooks with reading selections (often taken from the classics) that included grammatical points and new words to be learned. The purpose of this type of course was to teach students how to learn grammar rules, how to translate from English to Spanish and from Spanish to English and how to read books written in English. The results were very poor. Students could recite frozen grammar rules and read English with little comprehension but they could not understand the spoken language or speak it.

2. The second approach was the one used at most private institutions. It was a combination of the Traditional and direct methods. In the latter, translation was banished from the classroom: the aural-oral form preceded reading and writing, and pronunciation was taught phonetically. Only English was used in class, and grammar was taught inductively. Students were able to understand the spoken language and speak it, but only in those situations where they could use the structures they had learned in class. The results of teaching with such methods at both types of institution were completely unsatisfactory. They created lots of frustration and inhibition within the student. Instead of attracting

people to learn about the culture of countries where English is spoken, these methods made most people hate learning English. They received poor results in their experiences in talking to a native visiting Colombia or to an American in the United States.

It was at this time, 1956, when the Colombian Government and its universities began looking for a way to solve this failure in our high schools and private institutions. A completely new movement in TESOL started in Colombia, which was to be the beginning of a great new experiment.

Our universities, with the assistance of several American organizations, such as the United States Information Agency, the Fulbright Commission, the Kellogg Foundation, and others, organized English Teachers' Seminars.

Linguists and English Teaching Consultants came to Colombia to give orientation to English Teachers in the audio-lingual or structural method. Also, in local high schools, and private institutions, English Teachers Associations were founded with the following definite goals:

1) To look for support from the Colombian and the United States Government for training courses in TESOL in Colombia and the United States.
2) Look for coordination of goals, methodology, textbooks, audio-visual aids and testing in Colombia.
3) Organization of a National English Teachers Association.

FIRST GOAL. To accomplish the first goal of English Teachers Associations, in 1962, under the joint sponsorship of the Colombian Ministry of Education and the University of California at Los Angeles,
the INSTITUTO LINGUISTICO COLOMBO AMERICANO, ILCA, was founded with the

purpose of training its staff to introduce into the secondary schools of the nation an entire complex of the new concepts in language teaching.

The staff from ILCA started training Colombian English Teachers in the fields of Introduction to Linguistics, Phonetics and Phonemics, Morphology, Syntax, Contrastive Analysis, Audio-Lingual Methodology and Usage of Audio-Visual Aids. It was not very easy to move English Teachers to the new methodology in which they had to learn several new subjects such as basic phonemic, morphemic and syntactic structures. However, local English Teachers Associations and the assistance and support given by the Colombian Government to our Universities, the Instituto Linguistico Colombo Americano, the University of California at Los Angeles, the United States Information Agency and most recently, the British Council, created motivation among English Teachers to attend special seminars and training courses to learn how to use the audio-lingual method.

SECOND GOAL. As in many movements in education, at the beginning we encountered difficulties, but now we find a complete change all over the country. We are quite satisfied with the fine coordination of our goals, textbooks, audio-visual materials and testing system.

THIRD GOAL. In 1964 the Colombian Association of English Teachers was founded. It has been successful in holding a Congress of English Teachers in a different city every year, in which all the new movements and improvements in Linguistics and Applied Linguistics are presented. It also publishes its own magazine named "HOW" and distributes the Forum Magazine, which is a bimonthly journal for the Teachers of English outside of the United States, a publication of the Information Center Service of the United States Information Agency.

Many of our teachers have received Master and Ph.D. degrees in Linguistics and Applied Linguistics by using the advantage of scholarships granted by the Colombian and the United States Governments.

CONCLUSIONS: In Colombia we were able to move from the Traditional Grammar Translation to the Audio-Lingual method, because teachers were organized into local associations, which was the basic justification for receiving assistance and support from the Colombian and United States Government in the form of Linguists, English Teaching Consultants, books, textbooks, periodical publication, scholarships and audiovisual materials.

What were the results of moving from the old to the new method?

Students achieved effectiveness in understanding and speaking English, but showed poor ability in reading, none in writing and their vocabulary was very poor. Taking advantage of the fact that English Teachers in Colombia are organized, we have started a new movement to find out where we fall short. We have already started to teach how to read and write. We are using more the situational approach, in which we try to create in the classroom everyday life events. We have begun to analyze the results of the Pennsylvania Foreign Language Project, 1964-1969, which were published last year by the Center for Curriculum Development of Philadelphia. The Project was a comparison of the cognitive and audio-lingual approaches to foreign language instruction by using three different teaching techniques and three Language Laboratory systems. We are alert to whatever changes are happening and are willing to try them in our country.

Wilga Rivers in her article "Rules, Pattern and Creativity in Language Learning" says:

"In 1966, Chomsky shocked many participants at the Northeast Conference by casting doubt on the validity of the direct and uncritical application of linguistic theory to teaching practice. "I am, frankly," he said, "rather skeptical about the significance, for the teaching of language of such insights and understanding as have been attained in linguistics and psychology." He went on to say: "It is possible--even likely--that principles of psychology and linguistics, and research in these disciplines, may supply insights, useful to the language teacher. But this must be demonstrated and cannot be presumed. It is the language Teacher himself who must validate or refute any specific proposal."

With an obvious, thought unstated, reference to methods of foreign language teaching of recent years which it has been believed were consistent with what was known of the nature of language and of the learning process, Chomsky declared: "Linguists have had their share in perpetuating the myth that linguistic behavior is habitual and that a fixed stock of patterns is acquired through practice and used as the basis for analogy." To Chomsky, "Language is not a habit structure. Ordinary linguistic behavior characteristically involves innovation, formation of new sentences and new patterns in accordance with rules of great abstractness and intricacy." For this reason, he speaks continually of the "creative aspects of language use."

Linguistic science has made teachers very conscious of the fact that grammar is the core of language. Without an internalized set of rules, or syntax, they are told, no one can understand or use a language: Language is "rule-governed behavior." In the past, many teachers have uncritically adopted habit-formation techniques because language, it appeared, was a "set of habits." Now many are ready to seize upon a new slogan and begin to inculcate rules in the hope of establishing "rule-governed behavior," even though they

have only a vague concept of what this phrase can mean as it has been used by linguists or psychologists. In this way they hope to take their students beyond the arid fields of mechanical repetition, where pure habit-formation techniques seem so often to have left them, into the greener pastures of creative production of foreign-language utterances.

Before adopting any such approach, we need to clarify our ideas about the essence of language use (which in Chomsky's terms is a question of performance based on competence) and then select methods appropriate to the type of learning involved in its effective acquisition. It is at this point that there is most confusion. I agree with Wilga Rivers that there is great deal of confusion in Teaching English as a Second Language as a consequence of the new theory of linguistics. We, foreign language teachers should be aware of the technical meaning of the terms Chomsky used in his speech on language teaching because they may lead us to erroneous impressions of his viewpoint.

Finally, we should admit that a new theory of language performance has yet to be developed.

Meanwhile, let us be alert. Keep an open mind, but move cautiously to any new teaching techniques.